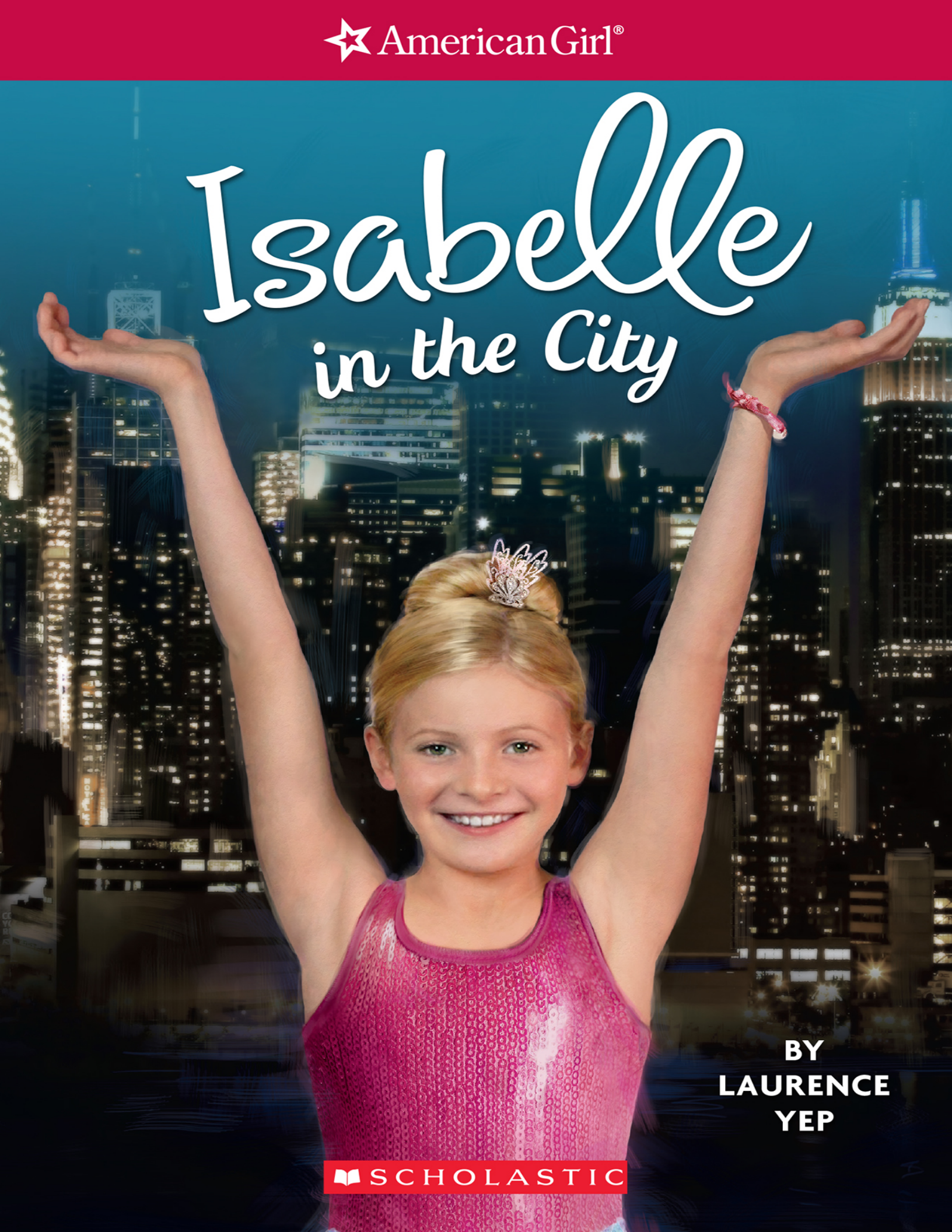
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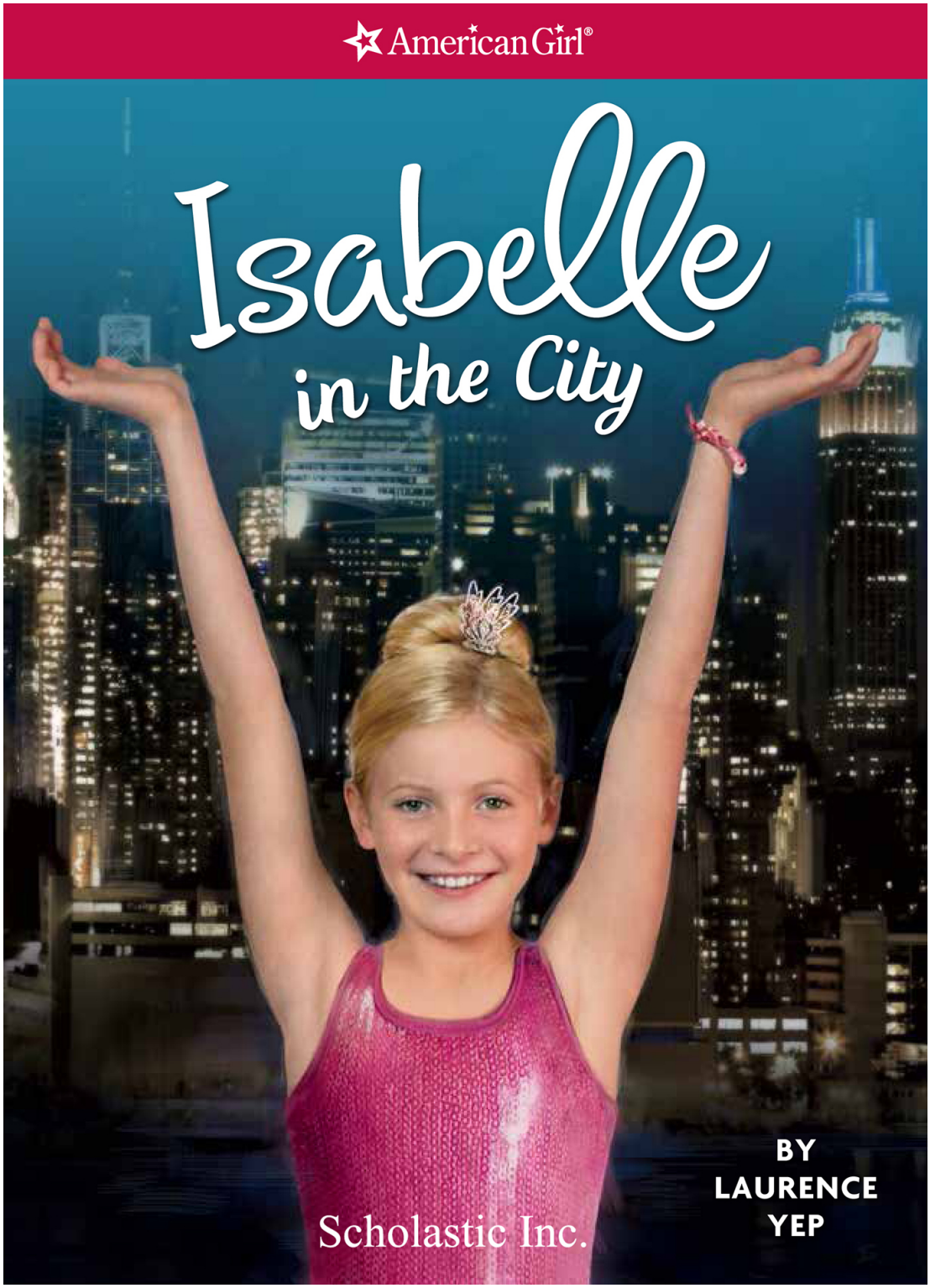
American Girl®
Isabelle
in the City
BY
LAURENCE
YEP
Scholastic Inc.

This story is dedicated to “Uncle Sam” Sebesta.

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Chapter 1
In Miki's Shoes

When I came to New York, I didn't expect to see Africa and Australia, too. But every morning when I woke up and looked over at the window, I saw tiny origami elephants and giraffes strolling across the windowsill, and kangaroos hopping away from crocodiles on the desktop beneath the window. Horses, frogs, butterflies, and pretty much every other animal filled my roommate's half of our room.

Miki had made the animals in just six days. No piece of paper was safe from her fingers. By the end of a meal in the cafeteria, she had turned paper napkins into a little menagerie around her plate.

Miki was ten, like me, but she'd come all the way from Japan to take the summer intensives at the Knickerbocker Ballet Company, or the KBC, here in New York City. My big sister, Jade, and I had come from not quite so far away: Washington, D.C., where we both studied ballet at the Anna Hart School of the Arts.

Being at the KBC this summer felt like a dream come true. For five weeks, I would be surrounded twenty-four hours a day by two hundred girls and boys who loved dancing as much as I did! The only problem? My new roommate and I weren't exactly hitting it off.

I was bursting with questions about Miki's life in Japan, but for the past six days, I'd felt as if there were this wall between us. And Miki hid behind it, busy with her origami or her video games.

So on Friday morning, I asked her, "Miki, could you teach me how to make any of those?" I swept my arm in an arc to indicate her origami zoo.

Miki hesitated, her eyes flicking from side to side. "Do you have paper?"

"I have some cafeteria napkins." I waved several tan squares at her.

She shook her head. "Napkins are too soft. You need good paper."

I pointed to the windowsill and desk. "But you use napkins sometimes."

Miki responded slowly, like someone walking carefully over a slippery floor. "I make them to exercise my fingers," she said. "But you are a

beginner. You would learn bad habits with bad paper."

"Oh," I mumbled, tucking the napkins into my pocket. "I didn't realize these were so lousy for origami."

When Miki opened her mouth, I thought she was going to say more, but instead she began playing her video game.

The light from the screen flickered across her face as her fingers danced over the buttons. She must have been playing on a hard level, too, because she drew her eyebrows together in concentration.

I couldn't figure Miki out. She didn't seem to mind sitting with me at meals, but I'd be in the middle of talking to her when she'd take out her game and begin playing. Was I that boring? Worse, was I that annoying?

Back to square one, I sighed to myself.

While packing my bag for my first morning class, I snuck peeks over the heads of Miki's zoo animals and out our room window. I still wasn't tired of looking at the view. Washington, D.C., had some pretty tall buildings, but nothing like here in New York.

Below us, the Chelsea neighborhood looked like toy blocks. The gray, red, and brown rectangles and squares were arranged in little groups. On top of some were small cylinders, which I knew were water tanks. Beyond, I saw the blue of the Hudson River and the dark mass of New Jersey.

Along the roof's edge of the nearest building were stone carvings of women's faces, covered with vines and leaves. I couldn't see why the builders had put them all the way on top. No one in that building could see the carvings, and we were in the only building tall enough to look down over them. But then, New York was full of fun puzzles like that.

Tap, tap, ta-tap, tap, tap. Someone rapped out the first six beats of *The Nutcracker* on our door, and I knew it was my big sister, Jade. At home, we shared the same bedroom, so it still felt a little strange to hear her knock.

"Come in," I said.

When Jade opened the door, I heard the voices of our floor mates gathering by the elevators. Students came from around the world to take the summer intensives, so I heard snatches of Spanish and something like French and German—and maybe Chinese. But that didn't seem strange to me. Back home in Washington, D.C., I was used to hearing a lot of different languages, because so many people came from other countries to work there.

Jade was thirteen, two and a half years older than me and tall for her age. But she was still shorter than the rest of the girls on our floor, many of whom were fifteen or older. Her long blonde hair was done up in a bun and she had her dance bag in her hand. She was wearing loose shorts over her leggings and had left her blouse unbuttoned over her light-blue leotard, the ends of the blouse knotted over her stomach.

"Hi, Miki," she said. "How are things?"

Miki lowered her video game. "What things?"

Jade scratched her cheek. "Um, well … you know, classes. Cafeteria food. My sister's snoring."

"Hey!" I objected. "You're the buzz saw."

"Not me," Jade grinned. "Mom says I'm quiet when I sleep, but you take after Dad."

Miki looked back and forth between us. She couldn't tell if we were serious or just teasing, and I think it made her uncomfortable. "I have to go to class now," she said, smoothing her long black hair back into a bun. She grabbed her dance bag, slipped her video-game player into it, and left the room.

As Miki closed the door behind her, Jade said, "I didn't mean to drive her away. Was it something I said?"

I shrugged. "Who knows? It's hard to talk with her."

Jade picked up an origami frog and turned it around in her fingertips. "She might be shy," she suggested.

I shrugged. "I wish they had put you and me together instead," I said, zipping up my bag. I always feel like I can handle anything with my big sister around.

"Maybe they wanted us to meet new people," Jade said, setting down the frog.

I felt a little guilty about that. If I wasn't hanging out in Jade's room down the hall, she was keeping me company in mine. My big sister was looking out for me, as usual. She was making sure that I didn't feel too lonely or homesick. "I guess it's hard for you to make new friends with me tagging along," I said, glancing sideways at Jade.

She gave me a reassuring smile. "You're all the company I need," she said firmly. Jade danced over to the door and opened it. "C'mon, sis. We'd better get to class now."

The dorm rooms were on the upper floors of the KBC building, with offices on the ground floor and the cafeteria floor between. The elevators were crowded this morning, as usual, but we squeezed into one eventually. When we reached the ground floor, we hurried with the other dancers past the posters from the various shows at the KBC. As we moved together through the revolving door onto the sidewalk, the July heat hit us.

The warmth wasn't stopping the city, though. Cars and trucks filled the street, waiting for the lights to change, and people hurried along the pavement. Somewhere nearby, a contest for the loudest horn had broken out among a bunch of vehicles.

The KBC studios were in the theater two buildings over, which doesn't sound like a lot until you realize how w-i-i-i-de those buildings are. By the time we were past the supermarket, the leotard under my T-shirt was already beginning to feel damp and clammy. Today New York was just as humid and uncomfortable as D.C. could be in the summer.

Even so, I could feel the excitement growing inside me, so I picked up my pace. *I was going to dance again!*

When Jade and I had auditioned for the KBC summer intensives, some of my friends thought the program would be like summer camp, but it was so much more. I got to dance the *whole* day instead of half of it like at my school, Anna Hart. And even though the teachers here covered many of the same movements and steps that my teachers at Anna Hart did, I was still learning a lot.

As Jade and I stepped through the stage door of the theater, I was happy to feel the cool rush of air-conditioning. We joined a stream of students heading toward the rear of the theater, past a guard at a desk. We had to wait for the elevators again, but eventually we got up to the third floor.

I turned right down the hallway while Jade headed left. "To the stars," I said to her. That was our school motto, which we used to wish each other good luck.

By now, though, Jade was focused on her ballet class, so she just nodded. She stared straight ahead, her mouth a determined line as she moved down the corridor. It was my sister's "dance face"—just like the "game face" of a basketball player before a big game. But maybe that's why

Jade danced so well: she treated each class as if it were for the championship.

Eagerly, I walked into Studio 301 for my ballet technique class. After dropping my bag in a corner, I took off my T-shirt. I'd worn a short dance skirt, so I had to put on only my ballet slippers to be ready. I began to stretch, impatient to get out on the floor and dance.

Ms. Aloff, our instructor, was a small blonde woman whose energy filled the room. Her hair was tied in a tidy knot at the base of her neck, and bangs fringed her forehead. When she had been a principal dancer at New York City Ballet, the bangs had been her trademark.

Ms. Aloff was not only one of our ballet instructors, but she also was the head of the summer intensives. I felt a flutter of nervousness. I really didn't want to make mistakes in front of her.

"Good morning, class," she called. "How are you all getting along together after your first week? Remember, the summer intensives aren't just about dancing. They're about the friendships you make, too."

I paused to think about that. I was holding my own in classes, but I was doing a lousy job of making friends. *I'm going to try even harder to get to know Miki better,* I told myself.

We started slowly at the barre as we eased into our workout. But soon the piano began tinkling out fast, energetic notes. Ms. Aloff seemed to be all over the room making corrections, and yet her eyes missed nothing. She might be correcting the arm positions of a dancer on one side of the studio, and the next moment she was bouncing—she never walked—over to the opposite wall to help another.

The only student whose form she didn't correct was Miki. When we were doing *tendus,* I glimpsed her reflection in the mirror from the corner of my eye. Her toes quickly brushed the floor as she extended her leg out and then back again, so both feet were flat with the heels touching. She did the move so easily, it reminded me of the tail of our cat, Tutu, as it swept back and forth.

The only comment Ms. Aloff made was, "Nice, Miki, but remember to really feel the music, too."

When she came to me, though, she actually knelt and gripped my foot in both hands. "Arch your toes more, Isabelle, and point your foot here." She touched the area behind my big toe and then my ankle. "And here."

Then she stepped back to watch my tendus before she gave a nod. “Keep that up.”

Miki was just as good when we did our center work. Her arabesques were picture-perfect, with her right leg stretched behind her and her arms held out just right. But she got a little tense whenever she tried to leave the ground. Ms. Aloff had to keep reminding Miki to relax her neck and not raise her shoulders when she jumped.

My jumps were the one thing that Ms. Aloff didn’t correct, except for one small suggestion. “Land on your whole foot and not just the ball, Isabelle,” she told me. “That will give you a better push for the next jump.”

I repeated her instructions to myself over and over while I waited for my next turn on the floor. We moved out in a group of four with Miki to my left, and when I landed after my first jump, I made sure my heel was touching the floor with the rest of my foot.

When I pushed off for a second jump, I felt the extra power that sent me soaring. When we reached the wall, I was grinning from ear to ear.

At the end of class, Ms. Aloff thanked us as she usually did and clapped her hands. And, tired but happy, we gave her a round of applause in return.

As I headed over to my bag to get my bottle of water, I grinned at Miki. “Great class.”

She nodded. “Yes, it was.”

That was the longest sentence she spoke to me all the way back to the dorms, no matter how hard I tried to strike up a conversation. So finally, I quit trying.

When the elevator reached our floor, there was a big crowd in front of it. They weren’t trying to get into the elevator. They were just standing around talking excitedly.

Miki and I had managed to wriggle our way into the mob when I bumped into Abby. She was Jade’s roommate, even though she was a couple of years older than Jade. Abby’s brown hair had been twisted into a braid on the side, and she was wearing a green tank top over black shorts.

“What’s going on, Abby?” I asked her.

She grinned and pointed at a poster taped to the wall near the elevators. “Big news, Isabelle. Every year the dorm holds a contest, and each floor decorates its doors. The floor that does the contest theme best usually gets free pizzas and bragging rights, but this year a trustee has donated money, so the winners can go see a performance by New York City Ballet up in Saratoga.”

I gave a little gasp. “Really?” My sister and I had missed NYCB when they’d performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington last spring. Jade had been busy with special ballet lessons, and I’d been rehearsing for a traveling performance at nursing homes and children’s hospitals.

“For this year’s contest, we have to show what the summer intensives *mean* to us,” Abby explained.

I spun around to look at Miki. “Wouldn’t that be great if we won?”

“Yes,” Miki said. She opened her mouth as if to say more, and I held my breath. I felt like I was watching a trapeze artist about to do a triple somersault in mid-air.

This contest will give me a chance to get to know Miki better, I thought, so I tried to encourage her. “Let’s put on our thinking caps and come up with something amazing.”

She drew her eyebrows together. Was she trying to come up with something?

Suddenly, I realized that it was no use creating an amazing design for the door if we had no materials to decorate it with. At home, I would have found supplies in my mom’s sewing room, where we spent a lot of time together—Mom working on her textile art and me designing costumes for my ballet performances. But I was a long way away from my home, and Miki was even farther from home. What could we use as decorations?

Then I saw the head counselor, Hailey Yagyu. She was a Japanese American from Long Island with a round face and a broad grin.

When Hailey saw Miki, she said something in Japanese to her. Miki broke into a smile—the only time I’d seen her do that—and responded in Japanese.

“Miki says you two are going to decorate your door together,” Hailey said to me.

“That’s right, but we’re going to need to get stuff to do that,” I said.

Hailey asked Miki a question in Japanese, and Miki nodded emphatically.

“I can help you girls with that,” said Hailey. “I remember seeing your names on the field trip to the museum tomorrow, right?” Hailey checked the schedule on her phone. “There’s an art supply shop not too far away from the museum, and a trimming shop, too, I think. Maybe we can make a couple of quick stops before we go on the harbor cruise.”

“Could we?” I asked. I could already imagine the treasures the shops would hold. Tomorrow couldn’t get here soon enough!

Back in our dorm room, I tried for the next hour to get Miki to help me think of some door-decorating ideas. All she did was nod her head at my suggestions and then go back to playing her game. I felt a swell of frustration. I was so excited about the contest that I *had* to talk with someone. So even though I hadn’t wanted to hog my sister’s time, I wound up heading to Jade’s room down the hall.

Just as I was about to knock, the door opened. “Hey, Isabelle,” Abby said. Beside her was Kayti, a tall Australian girl with long black hair. She and Abby had both come to the summer intensives for the last couple of years, so they hung out together. They had their meal cards in their hands.

Beyond them, I saw Jade standing in the center of the room. Was she about to go to eat with them? That made me feel guilty. If I tried to talk to her now, I might keep her from her new friends again.

Abby and Kayti had already stepped past me and were heading to the elevators, but I figured Jade could still catch them. “You go ahead,” I said to my sister. “I just remembered that I forgot something in my room.”

But my sister could always tell when something was bothering me. “I wasn’t going to the cafeteria just yet,” she said. “I’m practicing some steps from class.” Jade waved me inside. “Come on in.”

Maybe she was telling the truth about practicing, or maybe she was making up an excuse so that she could help me yet again. But I accepted her invitation as I always did and plopped down in a chair.

While Jade danced, I looked around. Jade’s half of the room was plain. The only thing taped on the wall was her schedule of classes, and like me, she was using the blanket and sheets the dorm had provided. Even though our parents had driven us and our things up from D.C., we’d packed only the basics on the list the KBC had given us: stuff like shampoo, and leotards and ballet shoes for class.

But an experienced student like Abby had made her side of the room very homey. Decorating the wall were KBC posters and photos of past

summer intensives—I recognized younger versions of Abby with other boys and girls. Her bed had a coverlet with red roses and a pillowcase and sheets to match, plus a white teddy bear perched on the pillow. Since Abby had flown in from her home in Seattle, her family must have shipped a lot of this stuff to her.

After a few minutes, Jade stopped dancing. "What is it, Isabelle?" She reached for her water bottle.

"Did you see the poster about the contest?" I asked.

Jade nodded. "You must have a million ideas already," she said with a grin.

"I just wish I could talk about my ideas with Miki," I said. "She says she wants to decorate the door. But when I try to talk to her about our plans"—I twitched my thumbs as if I were playing video games—"she stops to play her game."

Jade sat down on her bed. "Well, put yourself in Miki's shoes. She's alone in a strange country. She must be feeling awfully homesick, so it's no wonder she wants something familiar. Maybe the origami and the video games are a little touch of home."

I paused, trying to put myself in Miki's place, as Jade had suggested. Without my sister, I would've missed home, too—a lot. "I hadn't thought about that," I said, feeling a little embarrassed. *Would I go to Japan to dance if I could speak only a little Japanese?* I didn't think so.

Jade drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. "It took guts for Miki to come here. Don't give up on her, okay?" she said.

I nodded. Jade was right. I needed to keep working on getting to know Miki better—and when I did, I would do a better job of letting my sister hang out with *her* new friends, too, instead of bugging her all the time. At least I would try.

Chapter 2
Paper Dresses

If my mornings at the KBC followed a familiar routine of ballet barre and center work, my afternoon classes *didn't*. I was taking all sorts of dance classes, from jazz to musical theater and character. Once a week besides my dance classes, I also took exercise sessions like yoga and Pilates. As if that wasn't enough, there were separate lectures on nutrition, dance history, and injury prevention. The KBC website said the summer intensives would help prepare young dancers for professional careers. *That is, if our brains don't explode,* I thought to myself as I prepared for my next class.

Today's class was ballet mime in Studio 303. We were going to practice the special signs that ballet dancers and choreographers use to represent feelings and actions.

Our teacher, Ms. Harris, was an African American woman with her curly hair cropped short. She looked elegant, as usual, in her royal blue leotard and wrap skirt.

When we had lined up, she handed us each a list of mime gestures, and then we practiced them one by one. "Okay, let's get those juices pumping. Show me *anger."* Scowling, she shook her fists in the air, and we copied her. I tried not to laugh when I saw my classmates' faces.

"Let's try something calmer, like *thoughtful*," Ms. Harris suggested. She rested her chin in her hand. Her eyes flicked from side as she checked our miming. "Good."

We ran through another dozen mime gestures before our first partner exercise. Ms. Harris took a stack of index cards from her bag. "Each of these cards has a miming motion on it. I'm going to give you six of them at random, and you and your partner will use them to tell a story. But you don't have to use the motions in the order in which I give them to you."

When Ms. Harris assigned Miki as my partner, I tried to hide my disappointment. How could we tell a story together when we could barely

have a conversation? But then I remembered Jade's words: "Don't give up on her, okay?" And I took a deep breath and smiled at Miki.

When Ms. Harris handed us six index cards, Miki fanned out the cards so that I could see them. There were some nice ones that sort of fit together, such as *beautiful, dance,* and *dress.*

I tapped them one after the other. "These could be about Cinderella. Do you know that fairy tale?"

Miki nodded. She paused thoughtfully and then held up the card with *weeping.* "Maybe she cries." She brought a free hand up to her cheeks and drew them down, as if tracing tears. "She cannot go to the ball. Her clothes are ugly."

I nodded eagerly. "She's telling all this to her Fairy Godmother. But how do we work in these two?" I indicated the cards with *crazy* and *death.*

Miki gazed toward the ceiling and then said, "Maybe Cinderella can say this to the Fairy Godmother." She pointed her fingers at her chest in the mime sign for I. Then she twirled her finger in a circle by her ear in the sign for *crazy.*

"I am going crazy?" I guessed.

"Yes," she said, smiling.

I felt like we were starting to click. "And then she could say, 'I think I will die,'" I went on. I pretended to give a big sigh and then made the gesture for *I.* Then I swung my arm by the side of my head and tapped two fingers against my temple, the symbol for *think.* Finally, I made both hands into fists and crossed them in front of my waist, the sign for *death.*

"I like that," Miki said enthusiastically. "You be Cinderella."

"Don't you want to be?" I asked.

"I like the Fairy Godmother," Miki insisted.

I chewed my lip as I tried to work out my performance. "I'll be crying when you appear, okay?"

Miki nodded. She really seemed to be enjoying herself working on our silent dialogue. "I will ask, 'Why do you cry?'" she said. Miki turned her palms up, motioned to me, and then put both hands in front of her face and pantomimed tears falling down her cheeks.

I signed *I am going crazy* and then added, "And maybe I should also tell her it's because I want to dance with the prince." I made the mime gesture for *I* again and then curved my hands above my head and twirled them for

dance. Then I lowered one hand to the top of my head with my fingers straight up like a prince's crown.

"But I have no dress." I shook my head and put my hands by my waist, sweeping them lower and out as if I were tracing the bottom of a ball gown. I finished with the gestures for *I think I will die.*

Miki put up a hand and signed, *Do not go crazy. I will …* She frowned. "I want to tell you that I would make a dress for you," she said. "But I do not know the sign for *make."*

I looked around for Ms. Harris so that we could ask her, but she was busy with another team. "You could pretend to sew," I suggested, using my hand to mime the pushing and pulling of a needle through a piece of cloth.

"Good," Miki said, her eyes bright.

Ms. Harris called us back to attention then so that we could start "telling" our stories to the rest of the class. When it was our turn, I gave Miki a nervous smile. Then I went to the center of the floor and started sweeping an invisible broom as I pretended to cry.

When Miki danced in as the Fairy Godmother, I instantly saw why she'd wanted that role. She really got into it, puffing out her cheeks as if she were chubby. She didn't try to float like a butterfly. Instead, she gave waddling hops like a dizzy bumblebee.

Miki was such a comedian that she had the others giggling. I laughed in amazement. I hadn't even known that she had a sense of humor!

We'd practiced the signs of our dialogue, but not the facial expressions and our acting gestures. Miki was such a great actress that she made me feel as if she really was the Fairy Godmother—and I really *was* standing in a kitchen with a broom.

So when Miki finally waved an imaginary wand, I could almost feel a wonderful ball gown appear around me. I smoothed my hand over the invisible material, and for a moment I felt as if I was actually touching silk. Then I turned this way and that, admiring my magical dress.

But the ball gown wasn't just something that I happened to be wearing. It had a life of its own. I felt it pushing, tugging at my body. It was made to dance, just like me!

I pretended to grasp the dress between my fingers. Then I jerked my arm as if the gown itself were pulling me onto a dance floor.

Miki's eyes lit up when she saw what I was doing. She rose on her toes and raised her arms. Then she took a short step as she swept her arms down

gracefully, finishing with a kick of her left foot behind her. With a grin, I rose on my toes and copied her.

Suddenly, there was no wall between us. There was no need for clumsy words or awkward conversations. It was so much easier to communicate with Miki through dance.

We repeated the steps as we left the floor together. When we were done, our classmates applauded. “Very nice,” Ms. Harris said approvingly.

I was feeling pretty good as Miki and I went to sit down. We were starting to become friends—I was sure of it—and I was determined to keep it going.

But as soon as class ended and we started walking back toward the dorm, a switch seemed to go off in Miki’s head. When I asked her what other fairy tales she liked to read, she just shrugged nervously and began walking faster. It was as if the clock had struck midnight, and the friendship we had formed in the dance studio had turned suddenly—and sadly—back into a pumpkin.

The next morning was Saturday. When I woke up, Miki was nowhere to be found. I rolled out of bed and got dressed, trying to forget about what had happened after ballet mime class yesterday—and focus instead on the fun of everything we’d see today.

Besides finding decorations for our door, I was looking forward to seeing the exhibit “Clothed in Wonder—Sixty-Six Years of NYCB Fashion.” It featured costumes from a New York City Ballet collection, and I was interested in them not only as a dancer but also as a designer.

I’d designed my own costume for our school’s Autumn Festival. It had looked good, but when I’d tried to dance in it, I’d fallen flat on my face. So I knew it wasn’t easy to come up with something that would look beautiful while letting you dance well, too.

When we boarded the bus, Jade took a seat halfway down the aisle. I saw that Miki was already on the bus, sitting way in the back. I hesitated, wishing I could just sit here by Jade—that would be easier than trying to make conversation with Miki again this morning. But Jade saw me glancing

back toward my roommate, and she gave me a thumbs-up. “Get going,” she said, nodding her head toward Miki.

When Miki saw me coming, she smiled. That was a good start, I thought, so I sat down by her and tried to think of something to say. “I’m looking forward to shopping in the fashion district today,” I said. “Do you have any super-cool ideas for our door?”

She paused, and after a minute, all she said was, “Um … no. Have you?”

“Not really,” I said. And then I couldn’t think of any other questions. Miki looked away, and we rode through the streets in silence.

The costume exhibit was at the Fashion Institute of Technology, or FIT for short. Its buildings covered an entire city block. The director of the KBC was friends with some of the people over at FIT, so we were going to get a private tour two hours before the museum usually opened.

There must have been classes at the museum on the weekend, though, because we passed some older kids who looked like students carrying sketchpads in big, broad cases. I saw one girl in a short brown vest and skirt, a matching fedora, and ankle-high boots. Was she wearing her own designs? It made me curious to see the fashion classes. I almost wanted to go up in the elevators with her instead of down the stairs to the basement, where our exhibit was.

The NYCB exhibit was in a big gallery, where we met our guide, Ms. Scott. She was a thin woman wearing black pants and a white silk top. Her blonde hair had been done up in a topknot that reminded me of the handle on the lid of a pot. Clasping her hands in front of her waist, she welcomed us to FIT and then said, “Some of the world’s greatest fashion designers have created costumes for New York City Ballet. And their outfits added a whole new dimension to the dances. But as we look at their designs today, think about the challenges the designers faced. They were creating clothes not for models walking on a runway but for athletes jumping and dancing onstage.”

I thought about that as we began to tour the exhibits. The costumes hung lifeless on the mannequins. It was too bad we couldn’t try them on

and *dance* in them.

There was a beautiful pink gown by Valentino with winglike sleeves and a large sequined butterfly between the shoulder blades. I wanted to put it on and spread my arms as I danced. Would it make me look and feel as if I were flying?

And then just two steps away, I found a skirt, another Valentino that I longed to dance in. It was made of a thin gray material with pleats that were narrow at the waist and wider as they reached the hem. When I pirouetted, the skirt would swirl like ribbons of smoke around me.

Ms. Scott and the group moved through the exhibit much too quickly. There were so many clever designs! I wanted to stay and study each outfit, but the real eyepopper was the new costume for NYCB's revival of Bizet's *Symphony in C.* Crystals were sewn on the scalloped powder-puff tutu and along the edges of the white bodice. They sparkled under the lights, and I suddenly imagined how Jade would look in the costume dancing. She'd be a shining angel onstage.

I was busy trying to memorize every detail when Jade herself grabbed my arm. "Come on, Isabelle. Keep up."

The rest of the tour group was already twenty feet away. As she tugged me along, I twisted my head left and right, trying to glimpse the last few costumes.

Once we'd caught up to the group, it took me only ten minutes to fall behind again. It was amazing how many variations there were on a simple ballerina's top and tutu, and I was getting all sorts of design ideas. It was a good thing that our group was the only one in the room. If it had been crowded, Jade might have had a hard time finding me.

By the time we exited the gallery, I was feeling both excited and frustrated. I had ideas whirling around in my head for all these new outfits I wanted to create. And I could have come up with even *more* designs if Jade hadn't kept nudging me along.

"I don't want to see the other exhibit," I complained to my sister. "I want to stay here."

Jade clamped her hand on my arm. "Sorry, Isabelle," she said, "but they're not going to leave you alone with the costumes."

I wanted to dig in my heels, but my sister was an expert at pulling me along. She'd had years of experience at it. It's amazing my arms weren't six feet long after all that tugging.

Hailey ran down the stairs toward us, looking worried. Her short black hair bounced around her ears with each step. “There you are,” she said, relieved. “I was short on my head count.”

“Sorry,” Jade said and shot a look at me. “We’re coming. Right, Isabelle?”

As it turned out, I was glad Jade didn’t let me skip the next exhibit. There was a smaller gallery off the lobby on the ground floor. The sign above the entrance said “Papier Haute Couture.”

“In the 1960s, some fashion designers refused to be bound by just cotton, silk, and satin,” Ms. Scott explained to us. “They began to experiment with paper instead. Think how nice it would be to buy an haute couture dress for just a few dollars. You could wear it once to a special occasion and then throw it away and buy another.”

I could see a problem with that right away, and I put my hand up. When Ms. Scott nodded at me, I asked, “Wouldn’t a paper dress tear if you tried to walk in it?”

“Well, the better ones were made out of a tougher, coated paper,” Ms. Scott said. Then she grinned and added, “But if they ripped, you could usually repair them with tape.”

The first few paper dresses in the exhibit were early styles—simple smock-like things, but with bright, colorful, wild patterns. One was a red-and-orange paisley print that reminded me of something I’d seen under the microscope in science class. “The mannequin looks like she’s being attacked by giant germs,” I whispered to Jade, who giggled.

The fashion designers didn’t stop at just dresses, though. There were matching paper slips, and rings and pendants made out of papier-mâché.

“The fad died out, but recently, fashion designers around the world have been turning to paper again.” Ms. Scott led us to a beautiful dress inside a glass case. “The Japanese have a long tradition of making different types of papers and turning them into many useful things. Here is a Japanese designer’s take on a classic draped gown, using mulberry paper.”

The blue material of the dress rippled across the mannequin like water. A pink flower perched upon each shoulder strap.

Ms. Scott stepped over to the next display. “Now, this next gown was done by a French designer.” She motioned toward a dress with a print of newspaper headlines running diagonally across it. In back, long strips of newspaper fanned out like a peacock tail.

I turned back toward the Japanese dress, which fascinated me. The folds of the gown flowed and hung like cloth. “Do you think that’s really paper?” I asked Jade. But she had already moved on.

“Yes, it is,” someone else’s voice answered. It was Miki! She leaned to her left so I could see her on the other side of the case. “Come. See the back.”

I went around the case to see the chains of pink flowers that crisscrossed the back of the dress.

“Wow,” I said. I’d designed costumes made of cloth, but what could I do with mulberry paper? And what would a paper dress sound like? Would it rustle and rattle like dry leaves?

Pointing at the flower dress, Miki asked in a low voice, “You like it?”

“Lots,” I said. She drew her eyebrows together in puzzlement. I remembered how she usually spoke so formally, with full sentences. So I added, “I like it very much.”

Miki nodded, and by the way she gazed back at the dress, I could tell she liked it, too. This was great. I’d finally found something else besides dancing that we were both interested in!

Then Miki leaned her head close to mine and whispered, “My uncle works at a paper factory. His factory made the paper for this dress.”

A tingle ran down my spine, and I turned to face Miki. I felt like a crack had opened in the wall between us, and I could see her for the first time.

“Really?” I asked. “Your uncle?”

“I help him sometimes,” Miki said proudly.

I wanted to know more, but Jade waved impatiently. “Come on, you two.” Once again, the group was leaving the gallery—much too soon.

Chapter 3
The Shopping Trip

There were so many people on the sidewalk that it was hard not to bump into someone as we tried to keep an eye on Hailey and our other chaperones up ahead. Some people were hurrying into restaurants, and others browsed the vendor tables that lined the streets. I saw tables piled high with everything from old books to scarves, jewelry, and woodcarvings.

Even if I could have stopped to shop along the sidewalk, I didn't feel like it. I was already thinking of all the door-decorating ideas we could shop for at the art supply store. As we walked with our group, I said to Miki, "The door-decorating contest is about what the summer institute means to us. For me, the institute means dancing. Should we make a ballerina for our door?"

Miki motioned her hand back and forth between us. "Maybe two ballerinas. You and me?"

I grinned. She was actually thinking of us as a pair! "Okay. And I love your arabesques. So let's have our ballerinas do them."

She shook her head. "No."

I was a little hurt that she'd shot down my idea. "Then what should they do?"

She gave a little hop forward. "They should jump—like you."

I laughed. "Let's have one do an arabesque and the other can jump. How's that?"

"Good," Miki agreed happily. "Very good."

The art store was narrow but very deep. I stayed near the front where the brushes, sketch pads, and regular art supplies were. I picked out two

pads of construction paper, cheap scissors, double-stick tape, and other stuff I thought we would need.

But when I headed for the cashier, I realized that I'd lost Miki. So I hurried down the center aisle, glancing to the right and left. I breathed a sigh of relief when I found her looking at pads of ultraheavy paper.

"I already have construction paper," I said, showing her what was in my basket. "We can make silhouettes of dancers out of that."

Miki had opened a pad of watercolor paper. She was fingering the different-colored sheets and studying their surfaces from different angles—the way a sculptor might study a block of marble before trying to carve a statue out of it. Finally, she nodded her head excitedly. "With this, I can make the dancers come out of the door."

Huh? "I don't understand," I said gently.

Miki dipped her hand into her bag. When she took out her video game, I felt myself getting annoyed. "Isn't this a funny time to play your game?" I asked, trying not to sound hurt.

Her thumbs danced over the buttons, and then she turned the game for me to see. "I am not playing a game," she said. I saw the word *depth* on the screen.

"Is that some sort of dictionary?" I asked.

"English to Japanese and Japanese to English," Miki explained.

My stomach clenched. I felt so stupid for jumping to conclusions. All this time, Miki hadn't been playing games. She'd been trying to understand me!

After punching some more buttons, Miki held up the dictionary again, and I saw the words *three dimensions*.

A lightbulb went on in my mind. "Oh," I said with relief, "you mean the dancers could be three-dimensional. But that paper looks awfully stiff."

"With water, I can shape it," Miki explained.

I nodded slowly. She seemed excited about her idea, and I figured that if her water method didn't work, we could always go back to my plan of cutting dancers from construction paper. "Awesome," I said with a smile.

When Miki began to punch buttons on her dictionary again, I figured she hadn't understood me, so I added, "I mean, I'd like that."

Miki put away her dictionary. "I learned English in school," she said, "but your language has so many idi … idi …" It took her a moment to find the right word. "Idioms."

“You mean slang?” I asked.

She spread her hands apologetically. “You use words like *awesome* and *super-cool* in ways I don’t know. I have to look them up. I am afraid of misunderstanding you. I might hurt your feelings. Or I might make you mad.”

I shook my head. I remembered how hurt I’d been when I thought Miki didn’t want to talk to me at all. Anything was better than that. “If you don’t understand something or you’re not sure how to say something, just let me know,” I told her. “We’re going to misunderstand each other sometimes. But I promise I won’t get mad or hurt.”

Miki hesitated and then nodded. “Awe-some,” she said sweetly.

I held her gaze for a moment and smiled—until Hailey gave us a five-minute warning and urged us to finish up.

Even though this was an art store, we found little treats and snacks near the cash register. Miki bought a box of skyscraper cookies as an *omiyage,* a gift for her parents. I made a mental note to get something for my mom and dad, too.

The trimming store was three buildings farther on, and when we stepped inside, I just stood and stared. It was like a playground for designers.

One section displayed all sorts of lace trims to sew onto clothes, as well as every kind of braid and cord—from silk to gold wire, fringes to tassels. Another section was crammed with bins of buttons. Plastic heart-shaped buttons were stored next to buttons made of brass, leather, wood, shell, and even expensive crystal.

Another section of the store sold ribbon—from gold to silver to hand-dyed silks whose delicate colors blended into one another. There were spools of silk, satin, and organza ribbons of every color and pattern.

I expected to find supplies to make the ballerinas for our door, but I knew I could find a gift for my mom here, too. But where to start? And how could I see it all in the twenty minutes Hailey had given us?

As the others fanned out through the store, I started to panic.

Then I heard Jade’s voice. “Isabelle, come look at this,” she said, motioning for me to join her in front of a corner rack.

I had started toward her when Miki called, “Isabelle!”

She poked her head out from behind a bookcase. Based on the look on her face, I could tell she had discovered something wonderful and wanted me to come join her.

I shook my head at Jade and pointed toward Miki, gesturing that I had to go see what she was so excited about. I figured Jade would be happy to see that Miki and I were finally hitting it off. But instead of smiling or giving me the thumbs-up, Jade frowned. *What's wrong with her?* I wondered.

As soon as I saw what Miki had found, worries about my sister flew from my mind. Miki had discovered a bargain table hidden by the shelves. There were fabric remnants on the table—not enough for a full-sized outfit, but plenty to make clothes for our little ballerinas, and sold at really low prices.

There was a big box of buttons, too. I plunged my hand into the bin, the buttons feeling as cool and smooth as river pebbles. Miki joined me, churning up the buttons so that the bottom ones would rise to the top.

Miki pulled out a few pink flower-shaped buttons. "I think these would look good on a dancer," she said.

I nodded in agreement and kept digging.

Within each new layer of buttons, we found something else to add to our ballerinas. I found a rhinestone button the size of one of my dad's old half dollar coins. Miki found a dozen smaller rhinestone buttons. I think we both felt like miners who had just discovered diamonds.

I found short lengths of gold mesh ribbon, some of them wide and some narrow. Next I spotted a piece of black satin with sequins sewn onto it. I felt as if I'd picked up a piece of shimmering midnight. There was a section of misty white bridal veil fabric that I could use for a tutu, and I also found a small box of gold sequins that I could use to make a pattern on the tutu.

Instead of cookies for my mom, I bought her several boxes of shiny sequins and rolls of patterned ribbon. They would look great in her artwork.

Suddenly I heard Hailey yelling from the front of the store. "Attention, KBCers! It's time to go."

But we couldn't go just yet. I was sure there were more prizes waiting for us on the table.

A few minutes later, Jade called, "Isabelle! Where are you?"

"I'll be there in a sec!" I hollered.

"NOW!" Jade yelled back.

I sighed. As I quickly gathered up my stuff, I whispered to Miki, "I love Jade, but sometimes she can be *so* bossy."

Miki laughed and said in a low voice. “She cannot be more bossy than *my* big sister.”

I saw the rest of our group standing by the door with Hailey. Jade was tapping her foot impatiently. “You’ve kept everyone waiting.”

Hailey put her hand on my sister’s arm. “Easy, Jade,” she said. “It’s my job to lecture them.”

Jade closed her mouth, but she glared at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Hailey. “It’s my fault.”

Miki dipped her head apologetically. “It was my fault, too.”

“Okay, just don’t let it happen again,” Hailey said. “Now hurry up and pay for your stuff. We’ll be outside.”

As the others went out onto the sidewalk, Miki and I got in line for the cashier. While we waited, I asked her about her sister. She told me that Natsumi was eighteen and already dancing with the Royal Swedish Ballet. Miki came from a real international family.

“She must be amazing,” I said.

“Yes, she is,” Miki agreed with a nod. “I want to be good like her, too.”

“You’re already one of the best in our classes,” I assured her. I wondered if she had grown up in her big sister’s shadow just as I had.

“So are you,” she said.

That was nice of her to say, even if I didn’t believe it.

Once we stepped outside with our bags of loot, Hailey signaled for the group to follow the other chaperones back toward FIT. “Let’s go.”

As the group started to move, though, Hailey put her hand on my shoulder to wait. When she was sure Miki couldn’t hear us, she said in a low voice, “I’m glad to see you’re making friends with Miki. It isn’t easy for her outside of the dance studio.”

“I know. I saw her dictionary,” I said quickly. I felt guilty that I hadn’t realized what it was earlier.

“She’s taken several years of English in school, so she can read the language pretty well,” Hailey explained. “But she has a hard time when it’s spoken to her—I’m afraid her teachers weren’t very good at actually pronouncing English. It can take her a while to work out what we’re saying to her.”

“I’ll help her practice,” I promised.

“Thanks, Isabelle,” said Hailey, squeezing my shoulder. “Now, let’s hurry and catch up to the group.”

Carrying my bags of goodies, I jogged along the sidewalk and eventually fell into step beside Jade. “What was it you wanted to show me back in the shop?” I asked, hoping she was less grumpy now.

Jade glanced at me and was quiet for a moment, but then she said, “I found a book on Victorian dresses I thought Mom would like, but I didn’t buy it because I wanted to ask you about it first.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a little guilty. Then I remembered the purchases I’d made. “It’s okay. I took care of Mom,” I held up one of my bags. “I got her all kinds of ribbons and sequins.”

Jade pressed her lips together. “She’ll love them,” she admitted. “But it would’ve been nice if you’d asked me first.”

“I didn’t have much time, remember?” I said, a little annoyed now.

Jade gave me an odd look. “You made time for Miki, though,” she said in a small voice.

“Well … yeah,” I said, confused. “Isn’t that what you’ve been telling me to do?”

Jade stared straight ahead, and then she gave a little shake of her head. “You’re right. It’s all good, Isabelle. Come on. We’re starting to fall behind.”

She began to stride forward, but her legs were longer than mine, so I didn’t have time to talk anymore. I was too busy trying to keep up with her. She’d said things were “all good,” but they didn’t feel that way between us. What had I done wrong now?

Chapter 4
Dancing on Doors

That evening, as we left the cafeteria after dinner, Jade asked, “Hey, I hear they’re showing a movie in the rec room. Do you want to watch it with me?”

“Sorry,” I said slowly, not wanting to disappoint Jade again, “but Miki and I are going to work on our door design. Anyway, shouldn’t you be starting on your door with Abby?”

Jade shrugged. “I guess” was all she said.

She stayed in the elevator to go up to her room, but Miki and I got off at the floor with the dorm kitchenette, a place for students to microwave popcorn and little snacks like that. Miki filled a bowl with water.

“What’s the water for?” I asked.

“I will use wet-folding to make our ballerinas,” Miki explained. “Yoshizawa *sensei*—a Japanese origamist—created the method.”

“This I have to see,” I said.

My job was to make a tutu for one of the dancers, and to do that I would need to stiffen the material I had bought. In a cupboard, I found a really old bag of flour. I added a little of it to a second bowl of water and stirred the mixture. Then we carefully carried both bowls up to our room.

From the city below came the rumble of buses and trucks. Traffic was heavy this Saturday night. But I forgot about the distant noise as I dipped the remnants of the bridal veil fabric into my bowl and shaped the wet cloth into a semicircle of folds. Miki showed me about how big her dancer might be—a little over a foot tall—and I sized the costume to match.

As I worked, I glanced every now and then at Miki. She cut out squares and rectangles from a sheet of white watercolor paper and then began to brush a damp cloth against one of them.

“I didn’t see you do that when you made origami animals,” I said.

“I can shape the paper better this way,” Miki said.

Miki's approach to folding the first piece was a lot different from the way she had made animals. Instead of making creases by pressing the paper against a desk or table, she held the paper up in the air, using the pads of her fingers to coax it into bending.

Miki's fingers seemed to know just what they were doing. She had told me once that she made origami animals for exercise. Maybe she'd been keeping her fingers flexible and nimble for this art—for wet-folding.

Setting aside my little tutu to dry, I watched as Miki made folds for the dancer's nose, and dimples for where her eyes would be. Tiny curving folds formed her eyebrows.

"Wow, so this is paper art," I said, unable to look away from what Miki was creating in front of me.

"Do you like it?" she asked shyly.

"I really do," I said.

"Good. Now keep smiling, Isabelle," Miki said.

I figured she wanted some more reassurance, so I grinned. "Really, Miki—I love what you're making."

"Thank you. But keep smiling," Miki said again, and she began to make more adjustments to the dancer's face.

I was trying hard not to move, but I managed to ask through gritted teeth, "What are you doing?"

She didn't answer but kept working, glancing at me every now and then. Finally, she sat back. "I want the dancer to have a happy smile—your smile." She showed me the pale, friendly face staring up at me from her desk.

"That's amazing," I said.

"Thank you," she said. Then she craned her neck to see what I had done with the tutu.

I carefully touched my creation. The paste solution had dried, so I had half of a "saucer" tutu. I picked up a short length of wide gold mesh ribbon and said, "This will be the belt." I held up the rhinestone button. "This will look like a jeweled buckle. And I'll sew on the sequins last."

"Very *magnetic,"* Miki said.

That seemed like an odd thing to say, but I reminded myself that I had to help Miki with her language sometimes. "Um … do you mean attractive?"

Miki's shoulders sagged a little. "Are they not the same?"

I smothered a smile. “Close enough,” I said reassuringly.

It took all of Sunday to make our dancers, and when Miki saw that I didn’t laugh at her mistakes when she spoke, she grew more comfortable talking about herself and her family.

She came from Kyoto, which was the capital of Japan before it was moved to Tokyo. Her parents ran a paper store that had been in their family for six generations, and both of them were into paper art and had taught it to Miki.

Miki was just as curious about my family, so I told her about my dad, who is an administrator at a hospital but has his own jazz band. My mom preserves and restores clothes at the Smithsonian Institution and is a textile artist in her spare time. “She takes apart anything made out of cloth and puts the pieces together in new ways,” I explained.

Miki pointed to the paper tutu I had made. “So you learned from her. You see new ways to use things.”

I nodded and smiled, feeling a little proud.

The more I watched Miki and her paper art, the more I admired her skill. From a sheet of pale tan paper, she made the face of the second dancer. And then Miki shaped the remaining pieces of white and tan paper into two pairs of arms with hands, as well as two pairs of legs and feet.

Miki formed the leaping dancer’s bodice out of red paper, and I used the narrow gold mesh ribbon to make a V-neckline for the bodice. Then we added the belt and tutu I had made. Miki made pointe shoes from more red paper. When we laid out the pieces on our room floor, the dancer had three dimensions, just as Miki had promised.

I loved watching Miki’s hands as they bent and folded blue paper into a gown for the other dancer. For a belt, Miki twisted more blue paper tightly into a rope and attached her pink flower buttons. The second dancer’s pointe shoes were pink.

“You’re a real fairy godmother, Miki,” I said, which made her grin.

For the finishing touch, I added a collar made of beaded lace, and I formed a V of black ribbon that ran down to the waist of the dancer’s gown.

“You’re a fairy godmother too,” Miki said happily. “Now our dancers can both go to the ball.”

Whenever Jade or I do something good, we always share it with the other. “I’ve got to show these dancers to Jade,” I said to Miki as I jumped up and hurried out of the room.

When I got to Jade’s room, I found Abby in the hallway working on their door. So far, though, she’d just taken some photos from her bedroom wall and postcards of New York and put them on the door. A paper chain formed a big rectangle around all of the pictures. “For me, the summer institute means good memories,” she explained. “What do you think?”

“You’ve got a lot of great memories,” I said, studying the photos. Then I remembered why I had come. “Can I get past you to see my sister?” I asked.

Abby looked at me over her shoulder. “You won’t find her in the room. She’s been going to the lounge the last couple of days.”

The lounge? That seemed odd. Without me hogging all her spare time, why wasn’t Jade trying to hang out more with Abby?

Curious, I took the elevators down to the dorm lounge. It was a big room that stretched deep across the floor. There were three computers, where two kids were checking their e-mails, but otherwise the room was empty—except for my sister. She was practicing her *fouettés* as she listened to her music player.

Rising on her left leg, Jade kicked out her right leg and spun around in a circle. She repeated that again and again as she angled across the floor.

I sat down on a chair, watching. Jade didn’t stop, even when she noticed me. Her fouettés looked great to me, but my sister wouldn’t be happy until they were perfect.

When the music ended, Jade finally stopped dancing. “What are you doing down here, Isabelle? I thought you’d be working on your door with Miki.”

“We’re almost done!” I said. “I wanted to show you the little ballerinas we made out of paper.”

“Later, okay?” Jade asked. “I have more practicing to do.”

"Oh, okay," I said, disappointed. "But shouldn't you be helping Abby with your door?"

Jade shrugged. "Abby said she had everything covered." She shifted her feet restlessly, eager to begin dancing again. "So I'm working on my routine."

"But now's your chance to get to know Abby better," I said. Hadn't Jade given me similar advice about Miki?

"It's not that easy, Isabelle," Jade said. I could hear frustration creep into her voice. "Abby's usually with her friends, and they wind up talking about students and teachers from other years."

"Well, she's by herself right now," I pointed out.

Jade shook her head. "I still don't know what to say to her."

Realization crept over me. I thought Jade had been keeping me company here at Knickerbocker so that *I* wouldn't feel lonely, but maybe it had been the other way around.

"Just do what you do at school, Jade," I said. "You've got plenty of friends there."

My sister gave a little shrug. "At Anna Hart, the other students already know who I am, so it's not hard to start a conversation." Jade was such a great dancer that almost everyone at school treated her like a celebrity. "But here, everyone is so good that I'm just … just another dancer. It's not like with you and Miki."

With Miki and me? I couldn't believe what Jade was saying. Miki and I had only just become friends, and that was thanks to Jade—I'd only been following her suggestions. I almost said so, but then it occurred to me that maybe I *had* learned a few things this week that could help Jade, too.

"I think it's all about getting people to talk about themselves," I said. "You should ask Abby questions about her hometown—stuff like that."

Jade started to put the earbuds into her ears so that she could begin dancing again. "I'll keep that in mind for the next time," she said.

What about right now? I wondered. *Work on the door with your roomie so you can become friends!*

But Jade just kept on dancing, as usual.

I went back to my room, where Miki was waiting for me. She was rolling up small balls of removable adhesive putty to use to stick our dancers to our door. When we took them off the door again, the putty would come right off, too.

As Miki lifted the first dancer and started to position it on the door, I flashed back to our field trip to FIT. I didn't want the costumes to hang on our dancers as lifelessly as the outfits on the mannequins at FIT. "The paper costumes need to *dance,* just like our ballerinas do," I said to Miki, even though I knew I was doing a bad job of explaining myself.

If we hadn't acted out the story of Cinderella in ballet mime class, Miki might not have understood. But she'd seen me demonstrate what I meant with the magic skirt that pulled me across the dance floor—and maybe there was still some fairy-godmother magic hanging on to us now.

"The costume and the dancers are like partners," she said.

For an instant, I felt again as I had when we were dancing and miming and sharing the same thoughts. "Yes," I said.

Miki pointed to herself and crossed her hands over her heart. Then she tapped a single finger against her forehead. That was ballet mime for *I love the idea.*

The tricky part was putting my dancer into the right pose. I had to switch back and forth between holding up the pieces and doing short leaps in the hallway while Miki watched. Sometimes she adjusted the dancer's head or body. Other times it was the legs or arms.

The second dancer was harder because I had to hold up the paper with one hand while I held a small mirror in the other. That way, Miki could watch herself in an arabesque. But neither of us minded the extra trouble. I think we both felt as if we were working as a team.

Jade could be doing the same with Abby, I thought sadly. I was sorry my sister was missing out on this experience. But what could I do about it?

When Miki stepped away from the door, I took a step back, too—and caught my breath. Before now, when the pieces of the dancers had been lying flat on the floor, they seemed part of a giant jigsaw puzzle. But now that Miki had arranged them on our door, they sprang to life.

The first dancer seemed to be leaping off the door. And the second dancer was poised in that very moment when a dancer rises and extends her leg into a perfect arabesque. The light-blue gown that the dancer wore billowed outward.

“Do you like our dancers?” Miki asked shyly.

Opening my hand, I drew a circle around my face. It was the sign for *beautiful.*

Chapter 5
Jade's Great Idea

The next morning after my alarm woke me up, I heard people talking outside in the hallway. Were they waiting for the elevator already? I shook Miki's shoulder so that she'd get up. Then I got my little bag with my toothbrush, toothpaste, and other stuff. Yawning, I opened the door—and found Abby and four other girls grinning at me. I just stood there with my mouth wide open.

A brunette held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Piera." She had a slight French accent. "I really like your door."

"My name is Isabelle," I said. "And thanks." I motioned to my roommate, who was sitting up in her bed and looking very, very surprised. "But Miki did the hard stuff."

One by one, the other girls introduced themselves as well, complimenting us on our door, too.

Anneke, a girl with black hair, wriggled her fingers at the door. "I love the costumes. I sent a picture to my friends back in Copenhagen. They liked them, too."

"I'd dance in either of them anytime," said a blonde girl named Emma. She had a southern drawl.

"I'd wear that one to a party," Betje said, pointing to the blue gown. She had wide shoulders and wore a T-shirt that said "Amsterdam Rocks."

"Thanks," I said. After those compliments about my fashion sense, I wished I'd brushed my bed hair before I'd opened the door. "Miki and I had a lot of fun coming up with those outfits."

"Could you help me do ballerinas for my door, too?" Piera asked eagerly.

"Whoa, whoa." Abby clapped a hand on my shoulder. "She's my roomie's sister, so I get dibs."

Miki asked, puzzled, "What is dibs?"

"She gets to ask us first," I explained.

“No fair. I asked before you did!” Piera insisted.

Miki got out of bed and padded barefoot over to us. “I cannot make so many ballerinas,” she said, worry creeping across her face.

“Well, could you show us how to make our own?” Abby asked.

Miki nodded slowly. “Yes,” she said. “I could try.”

“Great!” Abby spread her arms excitedly. “Let’s talk to the rest of the floor and see if the other girls want to learn how to make them, too.”

Betje stared up at the ceiling as if picturing the floor filled with paper ballerinas, and then she smiled. “We might even win the contest. I’ve always wanted to see New York City Ballet.”

Abby spread her arms wide. “Hey, no guts, no glory, right?”

Startled, Miki tugged at my shirtsleeve. “What did she mean?”

In the short time it took me to explain the saying to Miki, Abby and the others had started stopping girls by the elevators and asking them to pass on the word about the paper ballerinas. Once the Abby-mobile got its motor going, there was no stopping it.

I turned to Miki and silently mouthed, “Help.”

Miki and I wound up going down to the cafeteria together with Abby and the others. When I left the serving area with my breakfast tray, I saw that Jade had saved a couple of places for us at a table. She started to wave, but right at that moment, Emma put her hand on my shoulder. “Let’s see if we can find a table for all of us,” she said, waving behind her at Abby, Miki, Piera, and Betje. It was obvious we were a group.

My sister dropped her hand to her lap. Pressing her lips together, she quickly looked down at her plate—almost as if she were jealous.

I felt a pang of guilt. “Sorry,” I said to Emma, “but I told Jade I’d sit with her.”

“I promised, too,” Miki said. I don’t think she was comfortable talking to the others on her own.

We made our way around the chairs over to Jade’s table and sat down, me beside Jade and Miki across the table from us.

Jade wasn’t eating. She was using her spoon to carve hills and valleys in her oatmeal. “Nice door,” she said without looking up.

“You saw our dancers?” I asked.

She twisted around to face me. “Who do you think told Abby about it?”

“Oh, right. Well, she liked it so much that she wants us to make dancers for *your* door, too,” I said. I was hoping Jade would get excited about

working with Miki and me on her door.

But Jade just shrugged. “You don’t need my permission. Go ahead and work on our door, too,” she said, spooning some oatmeal into her mouth.

I glanced at Miki, wondering if she had picked up on Jade’s tone. But Miki was worried about something else right now. “We do not have enough paper,” she said simply.

“Really?” asked Jade.

“It’s not just your and Abby’s door,” I explained. “The other girls want ballerinas, too. Maybe the whole floor.” I glanced at Miki and sighed.

We ate our meal in silence after that, but when we were finished, Jade glanced sideways at me. “Do you really want to help decorate all those doors?”

I thought about it and then nodded. “Everybody on this floor is older and has so much experience here at Knickerbocker,” I said. “But for once, we can do something they can’t.”

Jade’s spoon tapped the back of my hand, leaving a little stripe of mush. “How come you keep getting in way over your head?” she asked.

“Because you usually bail me out,” I joked, yanking a napkin from the dispenser and wiping my hand. “But not this time, I guess.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Jade said smugly. “What do companies do before they ship something?”

I couldn’t see where this was going. “They put the thing in a box.”

“And what do they put in the box with the item?” Jade hinted in a fake sweet voice. Sometimes, she was a bigger tease than our cat, Tutu. “And I’m not talking about packing peanuts.”

I shot up straight. “Paper. They crumple up paper and pack it around the stuff they want to ship.”

Jade drew a checkmark in the air. “Try the KBC offices and departments. I bet there’s some extra paper somewhere in this building.”

As usual, Jade had come to my rescue. “You’re a genius,” I said.

“No, I’m your big sister,” she grinned. “But I guess it’s the same thing.”

I turned to Miki. “The paper would be thin, but could you show the others how to make dancers out of it?”

Miki frowned. “Their dancers will not be as good as ours,” she warned. “We used good, strong paper. And the dancers will be plain.”

I thought of the presents I had bought for Mom. I was sure she’d understand if I used them for the contest. “Their costumes don’t have to be

plain. I've got lots of ribbon and sequins to decorate them."

Miki's eyes lit up. It was settled then. I grabbed Jade's hand and stood up. "Let's find Abby."

Abby was sitting a few tables away with the group that had been admiring our door. "Jade's come up with a way we can get enough paper to decorate the whole floor," I said, motioning toward my sister.

Jade stood uncomfortably for a moment as all eyes turned toward her. Finally, though, she told the other girls about the packing paper.

"Great idea," Emma said, nodding.

Abby gave Jade a playful poke. "So, Jade, are you going to work on our door with me?"

Jade hesitated. "You said you didn't need my help—that you had it covered."

Abby shook her head. "That was just because I could see you didn't have any photos with you. I didn't want to embarrass you by asking for something you didn't have," she explained. "But you're my roomie. This time let's do it together."

I held my breath until Jade finally smiled and said, "Okay."

As we walked away to return our trays, Jade nudged me with her hips.

"This time you really dove into the deep end, didn't you?" she said, shaking her head. But her eyes were smiling when she added, "But I'll dive, too."

I set down my tray and hugged her gratefully. "Like always."

In the ballet studio later that morning, all I could think about was the contest, so I got sloppy with my arms at the barre. Ms. Aloff had to keep repositioning them.

Later, during modern-dance class, I think some of my classmates were thinking about the contest, too, because they also made mistakes they shouldn't have—so many that Ms. Pujol got annoyed.

Ms. Pujol had tan skin and blonde hair cut into a short bob. In her salmon-colored T-shirt and pale gray shorts, she could have been mistaken for a student, but when she clapped her hands loudly, we all sprang to attention.

“I’ve taught here long enough to recognize the signs,” she said. “Your minds are all on winning the contest and seeing New York City Ballet, aren’t they?”

We all nodded and grinned.

Ms. Pujol was very different from Mr. Amici, my modern-dance teacher at Anna Hart, but she was just as much fun and just as challenging.

“Okay, we’re going to shake everything out of our heads until nothing’s left,” she said. “No doors. No contests. No prizes. Nothing.”

Instead of the pianist we had in ballet classes, Ms. Pujol had a drummer who played the bongos, a snare drum, and even a conga drum. My dad was a drummer, so he would have loved the music. When Ms. Pujol nodded, the musician began to slap the conga drum.

Ms. Pujol began to wag her head from side to side to the beat, and so did we. As the drummer picked up the tempo, she began to roll her head around on her neck as if it were a ball rolling around in a bowl.

It felt odd to do that move, but I tried anyway. As I did it, I felt my shoulders begin to loosen.

“There are no thoughts in your heads now,” Ms. Pujol said. “Only the rhythm.” She began to wriggle her shoulders and then dip them downward, lowering one shoulder sharply as she raised the other. “The rhythm wants to grow.” She swung her arms out to the sides and then over her head. We copied her as the drummer picked up the tempo.

“The rhythm wants to spread.” She closed her fingers and then shot them out again as if they were spring-loaded. With her arms raised over her head, Ms. Pujol began to dance to her right. “Can’t stop. Can’t stop,” she cried. “Come on. Rhythm’s got you.”

The nearest girl began to dance after Ms. Pujol, and soon we had formed a line, circling the room and moving our arms over our heads. “Touch the sky! Touch the sky!” Ms. Pujol prompted.

The *bam-bam-boom* of the drum went right through my skin and into my bones as I stretched my arms as high as I could. Ms. Pujol made me feel like I could do anything.

As all my worries seemed to drop away, I thought, *Miki and I already made two amazing dancers for our door. We can make more*!

Later that afternoon, Miki and I had just showered and changed when we heard a knock on the door. I answered it and found Abby grinning from ear to ear. “We were in luck. The KBC offices just got in boxes and boxes of new stuff, so there was plenty of brown paper.” She had a big stack of brown paper in her arms. Anneke and Piera carried two more stacks.

“We don’t need that much, do we?” I glanced over my shoulder at Miki, who shook her head.

“We wanted to be sure we had enough for the whole floor,” Abby said. “Just in case.”

I took a deep breath. This was going to take some organizing! “We’ll need a lot of scissors,” I said, “and we’re going to need a space big enough so that everyone can see Miki’s demonstration.”

“There’s the lounge,” Abby said.

“But who knows who else will be down there?” I said. “And anytime you wanted something from our room, you’d have to get back on the elevator and come up here.” I thought for a moment. “How about the space in front of the elevator?”

Abby nodded. “That could work. I’ll tell everyone to meet there at about seven.”

Miki was busy fingering the packing paper, a worried expression on her face. “It has wrinkles,” she said. “We need something to roll over it.”

“A rolling pin?” I suggested. I had seen one in the kitchenette when we’d gotten our water and flour there.

It took a while for Miki to figure out what I was talking about, but when she did, she shook her head. “Something bigger,” she said.

Anneke piped up with an idea. “The prop department usually has wooden dowels,” she said, holding out her hands to show Miki about how long the dowels might be.

Miki nodded. “Yes, good,” she said.

Abby deposited her paper by our door. “Let’s go check right now,” she said, motioning to the other two girls.

They returned a half hour later carrying a dozen dowels of different lengths, from about a foot and a half to two feet long. Abby held one of them as if she were saluting with a sword. “How are these?”

“Very good,” Miki said, her eyes bright.

After Abby and her friends left, Miki cleared off her desktop, laid out a sheet of brown paper, and reached for a dowel. She put as much weight

onto it as she could, the muscles on her arms standing out. She slowly rolled over every inch of the paper, repeating the process several times. When she was done, she had managed to smooth out the paper, and the wrinkles looked like nothing more than a marbled pattern.

Miki smiled a satisfied smile and stood to stretch out her arms. “Now I will try to fold it,” she said.

I sat down on my bed so that I could watch the paper artist experiment.

At first, all Miki did was study the paper from both sides and all angles. After a while, she cut the bottom of a long sheet of packing paper into halves that she twisted and then shaped into feet. I loved watching her hands work.

Next, she cut the other end of the sheet into three strips. The middle one was very thick, while the two narrower ones became arms and hands. The edge of the middle strip was cut into thinner strips that would become branch-like hair, and the lower portion became the head.

Finally her fingers began to fold and tuck the middle part of the sheet into a torso. She put some wrinkles back into the lower part of the torso to form a pleated tutu.

When Miki was done, I felt like clapping. She had made a single sheet of packing paper rise into a three-dimensional dancer. But Miki wasn’t satisfied yet. She went through four more sheets of paper until she made a dancer that she was happy with. Then she sat back on her bed and smiled at me.

Chapter 6
Sharing the Dance

After dinner, everyone on our floor met by the elevators. Miki used putty to hang her dancer on the wall as a sample for everyone to see.

Then Miki showed the girls how to cut the paper and how to fold and pinch each face so that it would have a nose, eyes, and mouth. I'd already seen how nimble her fingers were, but the others murmured in amazement as she made arms, fingers, hair, and legs. Finally, she showed them how to make costumes for their dancers.

Soon the air was filled with the sounds of snipping scissors and rustling paper. Miki became really popular as girls kept asking her to show them how to do something again or to check what they had done themselves.

Despite Miki's efforts, I could see that some of the ballerinas were going to look better than others. But no one seemed to mind. Every now and then, one of the girls would get up to model a dance move for the paper version of herself. Our floor mates were feeling creative and having fun.

Even though I'd never made one of the ballerinas myself, Jade and Abby drafted me as their personal coach.

For one of their dancers, Jade used Abby's phone to take several pictures of Abby in fifth position, with her legs crossed and the heel of her forward foot touching the toe of her back foot. Her arms were raised over her head, elbows slightly bent, fingers pointing toward one another.

Jade was just going to have Abby take her picture in first position, but I couldn't help meddling. "Jade, you really look good when you do this move." I rose on my left foot and kicked my right leg up. I didn't get it beyond my shoulder.

"You mean like this?" Jade kicked, and her leg kept rising and rising until her foot was above her head. She looked so strong, flexible, and beautiful when she did that.

Abby quickly took a photo. "Nice, nice. Let's take a couple more."

When she and Jade were done, the three of us sat down and began to work on their ballerinas. Kayti, Emma, Betje, and Piera were right next to us as they worked on their dancers, too.

"Abby, when you finish high school, are you going to apply to college or to a ballet company?" Emma asked as she tried to shape the arm of her dancer.

"I thought I'd try to join New York City Ballet," Abby said. "You all should, too."

Piera shook her head. "I want to stay in Europe at least—maybe the Paris Opera Ballet."

"It's Oz for me," Kayti said. She stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she folded her paper into the pleats of a tutu.

"Oz?" I asked, puzzled.

Abby laughed. "Kayti isn't jumping into a Kansas cyclone," she explained. "Oz is slang for Australia." She motioned to Jade and me. "So, what company would either of you like to get into?"

I laughed. "I'm just glad to be here right now," I admitted.

"I just want to go someplace where I can keep dancing," Jade said.

"Well, a lot of companies have internships or preprofessional programs," Abby said. She obviously had done her homework, because she began to tell Jade about some of those programs. Then she added, "But think about NYCB, Jade. If we both get in, maybe we could room together."

"Me?" Jade asked, surprised.

"You don't want to?" Abby asked. "I think we get along really well. You're as serious about your ballet as I am about mine."

Jade's cheeks flushed, and I could see how happy she was, surrounded by her new friends. As we worked, she relaxed more and more. This smiling, laughing Jade was more like the sister I know from home. All she had needed was something—or someone—to break the ice. By asking for her to help me with the paper project, maybe I had actually helped *her* a little, too.

When the dancers were complete, Miki and I helped our floor mates design costumes that each looked a little bit different. Miki showed the

other girls how to adjust the paper clothing with skillful pulls and folds, sometimes adding more paper for sleeves. Then Jade and I helped to bring those costumes to life with ribbon and sequins. We used up Mom's gift, but Jade and I agreed that we would get her something else when we shopped for Dad.

Once we had put the finishing touches on the last ballerina, all the girls went around to see one another's doors. We stood out in the hallways, laughing and chatting—excited to share this moment together.

And that gave me another idea. I got some tape and construction paper from our room and cut out some letters. Then I put them up over the doors in our hall. Together, the letters spelled: "SHARE THE DANCE, SHARE THE FUN, SHARE THE FRIENDSHIP."

Between dance classes and designing doors for the contest, I thought I'd be too tired to be nervous when the judges finally began visiting the floors. But I felt kind of twitchy as I waited for the decision in Jade's room with Miki, Abby, Piera, and Kayti.

All the girls were so excited that they talked louder than usual, but I found myself just staring out the window. New York looked so pretty at night, the lights like strings of shining pearls and the river like a silver ribbon under the moon.

Suddenly an arm wrapped around my shoulders. "Don't look so worried, Isabelle," Abby said. "We did the best we could."

Piera shrugged. "Who knows what the judges will like?"

"Well, *I* think the doors on our floor are the best," said Kayti. She held up her can of soda as a toast. "So cheers. Here's to Isabelle, Miki, and Jade. They did a super job."

I raised my soda. "Here's to *everyone.* We all did great." No matter who won the contest, I felt as if I'd won the best prize—their friendship.

Suddenly someone knocked at the door. "Come in," Jade called.

When the door opened, it was Hailey. "I just wanted to congratulate the winners," she said with a broad smile.

Abby gave a whoop. "Winners? You mean our floor won?"

Hailey nodded. "Come out by the elevators, girls."

The identity of the judges had been kept secret, but when all our floor mates had gathered by the elevators, we found Ms. Aloff, Ms. Harris, and Ms. Pujol waiting there for us.

"Thank you, girls," said Ms. Aloff. "I was so touched by your floor design and theme."

"She almost cried," Ms. Harris told us with a laugh, and pantomimed tears rolling down her own face.

"I've taught a lot of fine dancers over the years, and this year is no exception," Ms. Aloff said, "but I've never seen a dorm floor work so hard together—and so beautifully, too."

As Ms. Aloff went on with her speech, Ms. Pujol leaned over and whispered to me, "I hear a lot of this was your idea."

"It was everyone's," I said.

"And the costumes for the dancers on each door?" Ms. Pujol asked.

"Well, those were Miki's and my idea."

"Well, you both have an eye for fashion," Ms. Pujol said.

"Thank you, ma'am," I answered proudly.

Even after the judges and Hailey had left, my floor mates and I stayed together in the hallway. We'd worked hard, so winning felt extra special.

My dad is a musician, and when he's happy, he likes to play his drums. And I guess a singer sings. But I am a dancer, so I had to dance. I began to wriggle my head and roll it in circles.

Miki caught on right away, and her whole body began to sway.

I threw up my hands. "Best floor, best floor," I said, stamping my feet to each beat. Miki did the same, drumming her feet on the floor with each cry.

With a whoop, Jade began to circle around us, stamping and chanting "Best floor" at the same time. Kayti and Betje joined in, too. And then so did all the others.

The good feeling from that night stayed with me the whole next week, so I danced better than ever in my classes. And that feeling only got stronger on Saturday when I boarded the bus with Jade, Miki, and all my

friends from the floor and our chaperones. The drive from New York to Saratoga was a long one, but we spent the whole time laughing, singing, and joking around together.

After a few hours, we reached our destination. The Saratoga Performing Arts Center sat on the edge of a vast lawn, looking like a double-layer cake on a green felt table. People were picnicking on the grass, waiting to go to their seats.

As we got in line for pizza from one of the food stands, I suddenly felt a little homesick.

"Back home, we'd probably be getting lunch at the flea market and listening to Dad's band," I said to Jade. "I wonder what Mom and Dad are doing today."

"Missing us, of course," Jade said.

Miki was right behind us. "What do your parents do on weekends, Miki?" I asked.

"They sometimes go to festivals at a shrine. At night, there are fireworks," she said, spreading her arms. "They look like big, big flowers."

We all were a little quiet as we thought of home. But when our group finally got to go up the ramp to the balcony and we took our seats in the center, I was so excited that I sat on the edge of the cushion. I love home, but I love dancing just as much. I guess I'll always be pulled both ways like this.

The first piece performed by New York City Ballet was *Emeralds.* It had been choreographed by one of NYCB's founders, George Balanchine, whom I'd read and heard so much about.

As the performers danced across the stage in their emerald costumes, they reminded me of leaves drifting through the air. It felt so hard to sit still! I wanted to get up and float like a leaf, too, spinning gracefully above a riverbank. As the dancers swirled together, they fused into one—like the green flickers of a fire. I couldn't look away.

Just as I was catching my breath from that awesome spectacle, the music began for *West Side Story Suite.* The dancers' movements were so strong, sleek, and powerful! I wanted to get up and prowl like a panther, too.

When the rest of the performance was over, my friends and I lingered in our seats, talking excitedly about what we'd seen. We were one of the last groups to leave the center, and as we were walking back down the nearly

empty ramp, I saw the green lawn in front of me. It seemed like the biggest stage ever, and I couldn't hold back any longer. I just had to run.

Jade raced to catch up with me. "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

But I couldn't answer with words. I sprang and whirled across the grass.

Miki was right next to me. She understood what I was feeling without my having to tell her. Spreading her feet wide and throwing back her head, she held out her hand and struck a pose in a silent invitation to dance.

I accepted by throwing both my hands into the air and spinning around like a top.

Together we danced across the grass. And when we jumped into the air, I tried to explode like Miki's fireworks—big, bright, and beautiful.

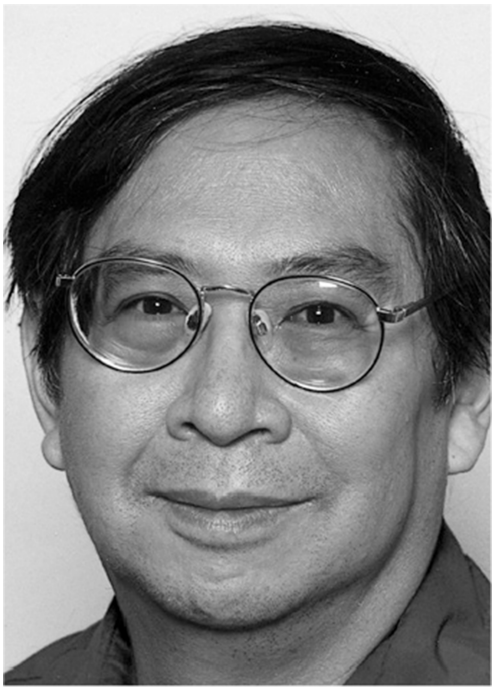
Suddenly, I felt a hand grab mine. I turned to see Jade grinning at me. Abby had Jade's other hand, and the rest of our floor mates were running up to form a chain. I grabbed Miki's hand, and we danced in a long line that snaked back and forth across the grass while our chaperones laughed and clapped.

We all had come from so many different places, and some of us spoke different languages to our families and friends. But as I'd learned with Miki, we could all speak "dance" to one another.

I caught Miki's eye and smiled at her. For just a moment, she freed her hand. Then she clasped both hands under her chin, and I recognized the word immediately.

It was the dancer's sign for *happiness*.

About the Author



Laurence Yep is the author of more than 6o books. His numerous awards include two Newbery Honors and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal for his contribution to children's literature. Several of his plays have been produced in New York, Washington, D.C., and California.

Though *The Nutcracker* was a regular holiday treat for Laurence as a boy, it was his wife, Joanne Ryder, who really showed him how captivating and inspiring dance can be with her gift of tickets to the San Francisco Ballet. Their seats were high in the balcony, yet they were able to see the graceful, expressive movements of the dancers far below.

Laurence Yep's books about Isabelle are his latest ones about ballet and a girl's yearning to develop her talents and become the dancer she so wishes to be.

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Paper Art Glossary

Dowel (dowl): A wooden rod that can be rolled over paper to smooth out the wrinkles before folding

Origami (or-ah-GAH-mee): The Japanese art of folding paper into decorative shapes and figures

Papier haute couture (pah-pee-AY oat koo-TURE): The designing and making of high-quality fashionable clothes out of paper

Papier-mâché (pay-per-mah-SHAY): A substance made from the pulp of paper (and sometimes flour and water, or glue) that can be molded when wet and painted when dry

Washi (wah-shee): The Japanese word for traditional papers made from the fibers of three plants. *Wa* means "Japanese," and *shi* means "paper."

Wet-folding: An origami technique that uses water to dampen paper so that it can be folded more easily and takes on a more rounded, sculpted look

Akira Yoshizawa (AH-kee-rah yo-shee-zah-wah): A Japanese origamist who was considered the grandmaster of origami and who developed the wet-folding technique

Paper Fashions

For Isabelle, making dresses from paper is a fun new fashion technique. But as she discovers during her tour at the Fashion Institute of Technology, paper dresses have had a long history. They first hit the U.S. market in 1966, when the Scott Paper Company designed them as an advertisement. If customers sent in $1.25, they could receive a dress made of paper, along with coupons for Scott products.

A paper-fashion craze soon followed. By 1967, paper dresses were sold in major department stores—usually for less than $10 apiece. Other clothing was made from paper, too, such as raincoats, bathing suits, and even bridal gowns.

Unfortunately, paper clothing had its downsides: it often didn't fit well, was uncomfortable, and too quickly ended up in the wastebasket. By the late 1960s, paper clothing had all but disappeared. But the paper dresses of the 1960s continued to inspire fashion designers.

In 2003, Japanese designer Yumi Katsura presented dresses made of Japanese washi paper as part of her Paris collection. The paper she used was from the Echizen region of Japan, where washi paper has been made by hand for almost 1,500 years. Her designs combined traditional Japanese style and paper-making skills with contemporary fashion.

Today, paper fashions still appear at design shows and contests all over the world. Perhaps Isabelle will design one someday, inspired by the paper art of her friend Miki!

A paper dress manufactured by the Scott Paper Company as a special promotion in the 1960s

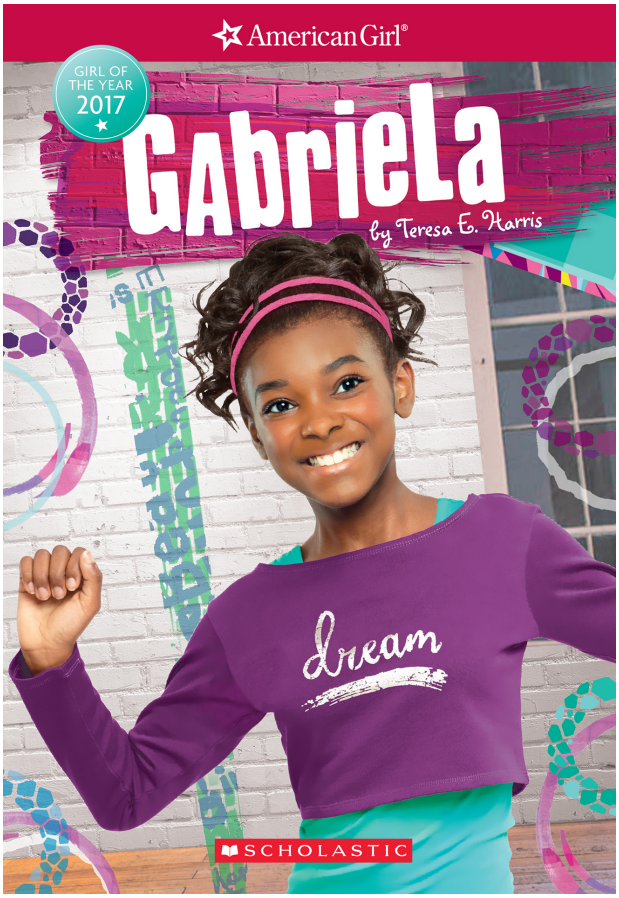
A washi paper dress from Yumi Katsura's fall 2013 bridal collection; © Shawn Punch 2012

A paper dancer designed and folded
by Sergey Yartsev

Meet the 2017 Girl of the Year, Gabriela McBride! She's a true talent who gets creative for a cause.

Can Gabby use the power of her poetry to save her beloved community arts center from shutting down?

Turn the page to read a preview of Gabriela's first book!



Like a Roller Coaster

Chapter 1

T*oe-heel-toe-heel-toe-heel-STOMP.*

Toe-heel-toe-heel-toe-heel-STOMP.

Each move burst into my head like a shout. All around me the air was filled with the sounds of tap shoes scraping and stomping, Mama calling out the next step as she snapped in time to the rhythm of the music. Above me, the sun poured through Liberty's stained-glass windows, leaving little pools of colored light on the floor at my feet.

Riff-heel-ball change-riff-heel-stomp.

Riff-heel-ball change-riff-heel-tuuuuuuurrn.

I stood on my right leg and whirled around, careful to find my spot so I wouldn't get dizzy. My spot was always the same in dance studio number seven: The hollowed-out square cut into the wall right between the two big mirrors. A phone niche, Mama called it, from the time when phones were so big people had to literally carve out space for them.

Toe-heel-toe-heel-toe-heel-chug.

Toe-heel-scuff-heel-tip-heel-SLAM!

My feet flew over the dance studio's worn wooden floor, from one puddle of light to another, and soon my heart was pounding out a rhythm in time with the beat, like the music and I had become one. I couldn't help it. I closed my eyes. I knew what Mama would say if she caught me: "Gabriela McBride, you know how unsafe that is? And you can lose your place that way!"

I did know that, but I knew Liberty better. Knew every spot on its dance floors, scuffed white from years of dancers like me stomping, turning, and tapping. And I knew that when I opened my eyes, a few beats from now, I'd

see Liberty's painted-over brick walls, exposed heating pipes, and its tin-tiled ceiling. And I'd have no trouble finding my place.

"And … finish," Mama said as she turned the volume down on the old sound system we used during tap rehearsal. The music faded and then disappeared. I opened my eyes just as Mama began to clap.

"If I didn't know any better," said Mama, "I would think I was in the presence of Savion Glover's dancers." Mama beamed at each member of the Liberty Junior Dance Company in turn. When her eyes met mine, she winked. I winked back.

Mama, or Miss Tina as all the other students called her, was the founder and executive director of Liberty, also known as Liberty Arts Center, a community center she'd started seventeen years ago. Not only was Mama the "Big Kahuna" (that's what Daddy called her), she was also the director of dance programs, which suited her just fine. Mama, with her strong, powerful legs and fluid movements, always said dancing came naturally to her, like breathing. And then she'd say, "It's like that for you, too, Gabby."

It was true. Dancing came to me as easily as coding came to my best friend, Teagan, or the way words came to my cousin, Red. Or the way words seemed to come to almost everyone else, except me.

I glanced up at the clock as Mama instructed us to take a seat on the floor. My heart was still racing, and as the clock crept closer to six, my pulse sped up. I had somewhere important to be.

"Excellent work today, ladies! You're almost ready for our Rhythm and Views show next month."

Five fifty-five. I stared at Mama, willing her eyes to meet mine. When at last she looked over at me, I looked at the clock and back at her. She nodded. She hadn't forgotten she'd given me permission to skip ballet rehearsal and go to the poetry group meeting instead. I half listened as Mama rattled off dates, expectations, and information about costumes.

"Remember how much Rhythm and Views means to Liberty and to the wider community," Mama said. "Sixteen years this show has gone on, and people always come up to me and say—"

I finished Mama's sentence in my head: *that they look forward to this day all year.* The Liberty community loved the show because we got to celebrate all the hard work we'd done in the last year. Art students got to exhibit their work in the lobby and guests could even purchase the artwork, just like at a real art gallery. The dance companies performed the pieces

we'd been perfecting all year. An empanada take-out joint from across the street catered the snack bar, and everyone's friends and family came out for the show. It was like a block party, cookout, and concert all rolled into one, and it was my favorite day, too.

Mama finished her speech and then clapped loudly again, her way of signaling that it was time to go.

I jumped to my feet, ran over to where I'd left my bag, and tore off my tap shoes. In four seconds flat, I was bolting toward the door in my sneakers, pausing just long enough to wave to Mama. She smiled and shook her head. I guess she was as surprised as I still sometimes was that I was in a hurry to get to a place where I'd have to stand up and talk in front of other people.

See, talking wasn't like dancing for me. When I danced tap or hip-hop, I could speak with my feet. My hands. My whole body, if I wanted to. I could make one move quiet as a whisper, the next loud as a shout. But sometimes, when I opened my mouth, it was like my words started to second-guess themselves. Like they weren't sure if they wanted to come out and when they finally did, I started stuttering like crazy.

But not all the time.

Like when I was racing to the dance studio where the poetry group met, I ran straight into Amelia Sanchez, my ballet instructor. "Whoa, Gabby, slow down," she said, laughing. "I spoke to your mom. You're going to make up tonight's missed rehearsal, right?"

"I definitely am," I said, without a single stutter.

I kept on going. And when I ran into good old Stan, the friendliest janitor ever, he said, "Where are you hurrying off to, Gabby?" and I replied, "Poetry club meeting. See you later!" without missing a beat.

Mrs. Baxter, my speech therapist at school, told me that people who stutter don't do it as much in places they feel comfortable. That's why my speech was hardly ever bumpy when I was in our little white-and-blue house on Tompkins Street with Mama and Daddy or at Liberty, because both places were home to me, both places filled with family. Like Amelia, who I'd known since she was nineteen and I was six. She taught me how to spot on my turns by challenging me to a staring contest. "Every time you turn, I want us eye-to-eye." Even now, four years later, if Amelia thought I wasn't spotting she'd gently say, "Staring contest, Gabby," to remind me.

Stan was like family, too. I'd known him my whole life—he'd been the janitor at Liberty ever since Mama opened it.

"Hold on there now," Stan called out, and I stopped in my tracks. "Poetry's been moved to the auditorium, hasn't it?"

Shoot! How had I forgotten? I took off in the other direction, calling, "Thanks, Stan," over my shoulder as I went.

By the time I made it to the auditorium, the whole group was already up onstage. For the second time, I stopped in my tracks. I'd danced on that very same stage plenty of times, but today was the very first time I'd have to *speak* on it. I gulped.

"Gabby, over here!"

Teagan called to me with a frantic wave of her hand. The poetry group had made a circle onstage in front of the heavy red curtain, and Teagan had saved me a seat right beside her.

"I've got everything ready to go," she whispered to me, reaching up to adjust her beanie over her strawberry-blonde hair. There were two things Teagan was almost never without: her coding notebook (she'd named it Cody) and her turquoise beanie.

"Got what ready to go?" I asked.

"The you-know-what that we've been working on?" Teagan wriggled her eyebrows. "You *know*, the *surprise*?"

"Oh, right!" I wiped my sweaty hands on my leggings.

"Are you okay, Gabby?"

"Y-Yes," I stammered. But Teagan knew me better than almost anyone.

"You're nervous about saying your poem in front of Bria and Alejandro, right?" Teagan sat up on her knees and faced me. She was in full-on Teagan Problem-Solving Mode. "Just relax and remember to think about each word before you say it. Give it time to form in your mind. Don't rush. Okay?"

I nodded again. "Okay."

Just then, my cousin Red emerged from behind the curtain, rubbing his hands together and smiling big enough to show off the right front tooth he'd chipped last summer when he hit a curb and flew over the handlebars of his bike. "All right, poets," he said. "Tonight we say bye-bye to that old dance studio and hello to the stage. We're big-time now, ready for crowds skyscraper-high touching clouds."

Red had been staying with my family for the past four months, ever since his mom, Mama's sister and a military doctor, had gotten called back

to active duty. At first, I didn't like Red being around too much—for the first few weeks after he arrived, I called him the Interloper until Mama and Daddy told me to stop. But it wasn't my fault Red was *always* in the upstairs bathroom *exactly* when I needed to use it. Plus, he was loud, like two-trains-crashing-into-each-other loud, and he never missed a chance to remind me that he was going into seventh grade and I was only going into sixth.

But, I had to admit Red had a way with words. He could spin a line of poetry like I could pas de bourrée. He lived and breathed poetry, and wanted to bring it to Liberty in the form of a club—nothing too formal. Mama was 100 percent behind the idea and, because I was supposed to be showing Red he was welcome and *not* an interloper, Mama said, "Gabby, you should join, too." She'd made it sound like a suggestion, but it was really an order.

I hadn't wanted to join at first—spoken words are your enemy when you stutter—but words just seemed to flow whenever the poetry group got together. Even mine—most of the time.

"So, the Rhythm and Views show is our first chance to show everyone what we've got," Red was saying.

I imagined Teagan's grandfather, who was the visual arts instructor and the unofficial program director, preparing his art students, too. Everyone—dancers, artists, and this year, poets, too—was a part of Rhythm and Views, and everyone needed to be ready.

"And we need to show them that we've got mad talent," Red was saying. "Which is why everything's got to be perfect. Our poems, the order, everything. Alejandro, can you handle the spotlight for me?"

"On it," Alejandro replied. He was tall and pencil-skinny with thick black hair that came to the middle of his back. Red sometimes liked to joke that Alejandro's hair weighed more than he did. As Alejandro rose and climbed up to the lighting booth, Red pulled a list from the front pocket of his shorts. On it was a list of names. The order of performances. I was first.

First!

"Ready, Gabby?" Red asked. "You can do it. You're big-time now."

"Ready for crowds," a girl named Bria chimed in.

"Skyscraper-high," shouted Alejandro, coming out from the booth at the back of the theater.

"T-Touching clouds," I finished quietly.

"Yes!" Red cried, clapping loudly. Soon everyone else joined in.

As I got to my feet, the applause died down.

"Take center stage, Gabby," Red said, pointing.

I moved to the middle of the circle and looked out at the sea of chairs. The spotlight shined directly on me. *Big-time now, ready for crowds.*

"Ssssssspeaking ough-ought to be—" I began, and then I stopped. My face grew hot. I hated stuttering in front of my friends. Maybe I could tell Red to come back to me at the end.

"You were doing great, Gabby," Alejandro called out.

"Keep going," said Red.

"Slow down and think about each word," Teagan put in.

Mama and Daddy were always telling me that while it was good to work with Mrs. Baxter, I shouldn't let my bumpy speech stop me from talking. "We love you no matter how many sounds you make," they'd say. "Say what you have to say! We're always listening."

"Okay." Another deep breath. Then I started over.

"Speaking ought to be, ought to be like … like breathing
Words always there, no need for … reaching
Like cracking a jjjjjjoke is for a joker
But for me it's like a roller coaster … coaster"

I paused. I knew this poem and even bigger than that, I knew these people. Red. Teagan. Alejandro. Bria. I knew this space, too, Liberty's auditorium. I knew there were 480 seats, but only 476 worked. I knew seat 3L was the best in the house, that one of the angels carved into the balcony was cross-eyed, and that there was a corner where every word you said echoed throughout the auditorium, even if you whispered. *You're home, Gabby*, I told myself, and picked up my poem where I left off.

"Up, up, up and then racing … racing to the g-ground
Words flying by me that I can't pin down

Words soar past me, whip my face like … like air
In my mind, in my heart, everywhere
I … I ch-chase those wwwwords down
But when I try to speak, I don't make a sound

Up, up, up and then racing to the ground
Words flying by me that I can't pin down

Sometimes my words get caught
Come grinding to a halt
I slip, I fall, I stutter
But it's not my fault

Up, up, up and then racing to the ground
Words flying by me that I can't pin down."

The applause was instantaneous. So was my smile. I'd made it through my whole poem, and by the end I wasn't stuttering at all! I took a deep, exaggerated bow. And then another, and then curtsied until the rest of the poetry group was either laughing or calling out, "Brava, brava!" or "Encore, encore!"

Red, still beaming, held up his hand for silence. "No time for encores, but awesome job, Gabby." He walked over and gave me a high five. "Bria, you're up."

Bria, a tall, round-faced girl with a big, bushy ponytail, took center stage as I slid back into my place next to Teagan. Bria, like Alejandro and Red, was going into seventh grade and when Red had told her about the poetry group, she'd joined immediately.

"Nice job," Teagan mouthed. Then she reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a flash drive. "Ready for later?" she whispered.

I nodded. I felt ready for anything.

The rest of the performances flew by, and I still couldn't believe how far we'd all come since Red had first started the poetry club. And even more than that, I couldn't wait for the show. Poetry, dancing, and—

"Gabby and I have a surprise," Teagan announced, just as Alejandro, the final poet, took his seat. "We've been working on something for the show, a little something visual to go with our poetry. Wait right here."

Teagan jumped to her feet, pulling me with her. We darted around the curtain and backstage, where there was a laptop sitting on top of a podium. Wires snaked down the side of the podium like vines. To anyone else all of those wires would have been intimidating. But not to Teagan. In one smooth motion, she plugged the projector adapter into the laptop, inserted her flash

drive, and said, “Can you get the main power switch for the podium and projector?” She pointed at a black box hanging on the wall behind us. It looked like a very large, very expensive version of the circuit breaker in our garage, only, I realized after pulling the box open, much more complicated. Inside were three rows of buttons and switches, all glowing a faint shade of neon green.

“Um, Teagan?”

“On it,” Teagan replied, and hurried over. She pointed at a big silver button on top of all the others. “This one turns on the main power for all the stage equipment. It’s kind of cool how it all works. You see, this main box controls—”

“Teagan,” I cut in. Sometimes, when Teagan started talking tech, she couldn’t stop.

“Sorry!” Teagan said, laughing. “Ready?”

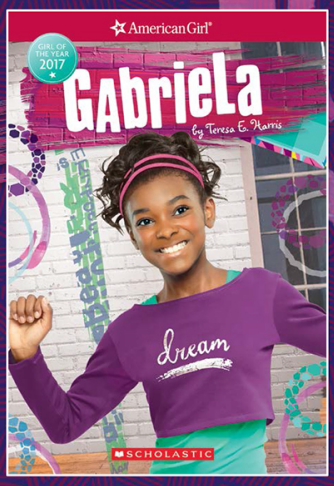
I nodded. We reached for the button, both of our fingers pushing it at the same time.

And everything went black.

Meet

GABRIELA McBride™

GIRL OF THE YEAR™ 2017



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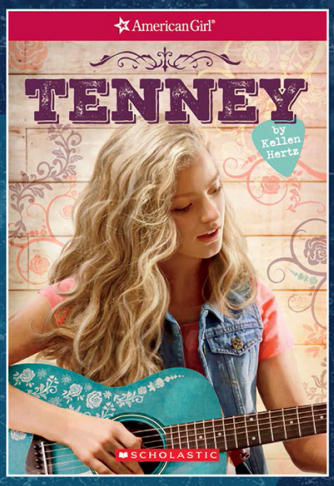

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